

The Power of Doing Nothing

Category: How Can I Help?

written by Ellen Kolton | October 6, 2019

In the support group that I facilitate for family and friends of individuals struggling with addictive behaviors, people spill their stories of sadness, of anger, of frustration...

Mary barely introduces herself before describing her struggles. Married for thirteen years, the mother of two little boys, she complains about her husband's alcoholism. Her in-laws' get-togethers revolve around heavy drinking, dancing, and singing, often extending into the next morning. Last weekend, after her husband got fired, she took her boys and slept at her mother's place.

The group's initial impulse is to offer advice. Mary responds to every suggestion by explaining why it won't work. She has tried everything. She just needs to vent.

Bryce, another group member, talks about his son, whom he adopted as a little boy from an orphanage. The adorable child has grown into a young man with a serious drinking problem. He's stolen cash and credit cards from Bryce. When drunk, he goes on angry rampages, scarring walls in their home with fist holes and door-knob dents. Each time Bryce admits his son into a residential rehab, he runs away. Bryce is suffering: "I can't live with him anymore. But how can I put him out in the street? He's my son."

I ask gentle questions, aimed at helping Bryce make peace with his inability to short-circuit his son's self-destructive behavior. I ask what he's doing to care for himself.

The stories go on. Robert and Beth's daughter uses heroin. After an arrest and serving jail time, she now lives in a sober house. Will it last, they wonder?

Michael's son, diagnosed with a serious mental illness, has a history of abusing prescription medications. Now, after spending months in a residential rehab, he is living with Michael again and taking his meds responsibly. Still, braced for his son's possible relapse, Michael continues to attend the group to share his fears.

Because of the stigma attached to substance use disorders and mental illness, people are often ashamed to share their struggles. They say the group offers genuine relief, a place where they can speak freely, knowing they'll be understood.

I used to feel that I wasn't doing enough. But over time, as I've seen people returning each week, I've come to appreciate the enormous power of listening. To quote Thich Nhat Hanh, "The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence."

I'm often helpless to fix the problems of others, but that doesn't mean I can't be helpful. Sometimes I'm most helpful when I simply say, "I know. I understand. It's hard."

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